SWALE

Mary Mattingly
Lives and works in New York.

Swale was a floating edible landscape built atop a 5,000 square-foot barge that traveled to public piers in New York City welcoming visitors to harvest perennial fruits and vegetables free of charge. *Swale* docked at public piers in Brooklyn, Governors Island, and the Bronx in spaces adjacent to the city's public land. Public land in the city equates to 30,000 acres, as compared with the 100 acres of community garden space where, if you have a plot, picking food is allowed. *Swale* re-valued public land by using the 'common law' of the water as a loophole to do what had been illegal on public land: legally, picking plants was considered destruction of property. *Swale* followed the insights of social scientist Elinor Ostrom and traditional ecological knowledge that claim that in a vibrant commons, people had a vital role to play not only as beneficiaries, but also as co-creators, protectors, and decision makers.

Swale was also experiential: people walked onto a barge adjacent to a city park to find that it looked, smelled, and tasted like land but felt different. As they grew accustomed to the moving vessel and their forested surroundings, their perspective shifted and soon it could feel like the city was moving back and forth, as the structure they were on began to feel stable. People suddenly cared about everything: where the soil came from, where the water came from that watered the plants, and how this translated to the food they were eating at home. An edible forest built on an industrial barge questions land use in the city, food systems, infrastructure, public health priorities, and whether the establishment of a commons is still possible. It can also model alternatives, request involvement, and put trust in city dwellers as agents who care for shared resources. As a direct result of *Swale* and the support of community groups, in 2017 the New York City Parks Department opened their first land-based pilot – a public "foodway" at Concrete Plant Park in the Bronx.

(text by Mary Mattingly)

Mary Mattingly is an interdisciplinary artist who is driven to explore imagined socio-ecological futures through co-creation. Based in New York City, her work involves building sculptural ecosystems that prioritize access to food, shelter, and clean water, resulting in large-scale participatory projects around the world. These projects rely on absurdity and chance encounters to provide discordant perspectives and shift perceptions.

Mattingly's sculptures foster coalition-building and help to strengthen common spaces. In 2016, her leadership of *Swale*, a floating sculpture and edible landscape on a public barge in New York, inspired the New York City Parks Department to establish the city's first public "foodway." The foodway is a public space where people can legally forage in a city where it is otherwise publicly prohibited.

Mattingly's work frequently activates public spaces and has also been exhibited at institutions such as Storm King Art Center, the International Center of Photography, Seoul Art Center, the Brooklyn Museum, Palais de Tokyo, Barbican Art Gallery, and Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Havana. Notable grants include those by the James L. Knight Foundation, the Harpo Foundation, New York Foundation for the Arts, the Jerome Foundation, and the Art Matters Foundation. Mattingly is a 2023 recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship.

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Swale in the East River, 2017, photo by Cloudfactory



Swale at Brooklyn Bridge Park, 2017, photo by Katherine Kiefert



Foraging from Swale on Governors Island, 2016, photo by Mary Mattingly



Swale at Brooklyn Bridge Park, 2017, photo by Katherine Kiefert



Plants on Swale, 2017, photo by Katherine Kiefert



Young people foraging on Swale, 2018, photo: Mary Mattingly



Foraging apples on Swale, 2018, photo: Mary Mattingly



Edible plants on Swale, 2017, photo: Katherine Kiefert



Foraging on Swale, 2017, photo: Katherine Kiefert



Tours on Swale, 2017, photo: Katherine Kiefert



View from Swale in Brooklyn to Manhattan, 2018, photo: Mary Mattingly



Tours on Swale, 2018, photo: Mary Mattingly



Swale at Concrete Plant Park in the Bronx, 2016, photo by Rava Films



Swale at Concrete Plant Park, 2018, photo: Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice



Sequoia Carr selling plant-based goods at Concrete Plant Park in the Bronx, 2016, photo by Mary Mattingly



Swale at Brooklyn Bridge Park, 2018, photo by Katherine Kiefert



Swale at Concrete Plant Park in the Bronx, 2017, photo by Subhram Reddy



New York City's first Foodway, 2017, photo: NYC Parks



Foodway, 2020, Photo: Bronx River Alliance



After Swale's pilot project, the Bronx River Foodway at Concrete Plant Park, 2022, photo: Bronx River Alliance